

Fleeting shadows: the painters of Jalisco in a melancholy light

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Carlos Vargas Pons, *Untitled*, 1993.

What do the works of Dr. Atl, Roberto Montenegro, Juan Soriano, or, among the youngest, Roberto Rébora or Carlos Vargas Pons, have in common, beyond the fact that they were born in the same region of Mexico? The subject of regional character in art is most interesting but requires utmost care in its treatment. All-embracing judgments should not diminish the pleasure to be had from each individual work, but rather reveal or emphasize its features.

Can there be anything more absurd than turning a passport or a birth certificate into a measure of style? It has often been done. To avoid this, prior consideration must be given to the risks inherent in approaching any group of artists under a geographical or political sign. Generalizations about their work require clearly establishing the degree of subjectivity with which such classifications are undertaken. It is, to a great extent, arbitrary to believe that artists from the same region constitute a unit with more common characteristics than differences. It seems absurd to think that the land, be it forbidding or lush, its climate, or the rain, affect different painters in the same way, and that their works share an indelible label of origin.

When we think in this way, we do as the ancients who, with blind faith—which they took to be a form of science, a certitude—classified all human beings by the planet under which they were born. The stars seemed to determine the entire destiny of humankind. Perhaps, in a future as yet unimaginable, there will be people

to whom it will seem as strange to exhibit the works of painters from Jalisco, as it would to us now, to open a vast exhibit of works by painters born under Sagittarius.

The supposed modernity of this century and part of the previous one has pressed upon us faith in determinisms equivalent to that which medieval scholastics had in astrology. Progress, economics or history, politics, sociology, geography, biology, even pedagogy have been the new astrologies in the modern ingenuousness with which we have grown up. For it is exaggeratedly supposed that origin, social class, education, race, are all inescapable signs that clearly define humankind's destiny. A birth certificate is like a new star chart.

The problem of determinism increases when the subject is artists, who by nature escape or ought to escape the clichés of the aesthetic of their time and place. Every one of them under the same sun is a shadow fleeing from the wall that determines his or her shape.

Nevertheless, to say here and now, "the painters of Jalisco," or "the painters of Oaxaca," is to mention two very clearly differentiated groups of works. But it is one thing that each of these universes possesses its own coherence and is different from the other, and something very different to think that local geography and history determine the aesthetic characteristics of their painters. The same pitfall obliges us to think, for example, that the works of Oaxacan painters such as Tamayo and Toledo are determined to a greater extent by the indigenous past of their region than by the infinite variety of art of all ages they have seen. Is not the trace of Australian aboriginal art in the work of Toledo evident to all who recognize it? Is not the magic inheritance of Marc Chagall obvious in many of the Oaxacan

painters considered most purely indigenous, such as Rodolfo Morales or Maximino Javier?

It is also just as clear that no universal feature entirely determines an artist. Such a feature would in any event be no more than one of many leaves on his luxuriant tree. His trunk, his really central feature is the confluence of everything in an artist's life that he or she transforms into oeuvre, no matter where that life experience he or she converts into aesthetic experience for us may come from. But, given our mentality, we cannot help thinking that the leaf we have closest at hand, clearest to the eye, or most easily identified, is the dominant one. And we cover our eyes with it.

In Oaxaca, it is the indigenous element in regional ideology that is the supreme determinant dominating all others, preventing comprehension of the supposed regional character of an art. In Jalisco, it is important to note very different signs, the variety of which prevents any one of them to cloud all the other possibilities.

On the other hand, if art does have roots, they are aerial. An artist from Oaxaca and another from Jalisco may come from different ground but their roots take nourishment from the same air, which each of them transforms and appropriates in different ways.

Though we said that the artist, like a fleeting shadow, by nature escapes the sunlight that suddenly tries to make him the same, perhaps we ought to observe each of those flights. What the artists of Jalisco have in common may be those flights. A feature that is not negative but contrasting. Is it not the artist who contrasts, emerges from the ground that permeates him? The aesthetic flight from unification is a negative value only if taken as the narrow criterion by which regional unification

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Ismael Vargas, *Textiles*, 1989.

José Clemente Orozco, *Prometheus*, 1944.



is attempted. From the point of view of art, it is a creative, positive value. "To seek a vanishing point," wrote Gilles Deleuze, "is to affirm that which is most authentic about a line, meaning that each of us, that is 'our potential to be in the world' (as Spinoza said), is a line or lines in motion, not anchored, rooted surface." Lines, like fleeting shadows. Let us attempt to follow some of them in their flight, trying to accept, though it may be difficult, that what to a great extent unites and brings them together is our scrutiny. Choice, not fate.

For myself, I seek in this selection of paintings from Jalisco, diverse shadows in flight from a common sun, and I find in that choice of light and shadows, works in which melancholy suddenly seems dominant.

In the painting by Jorge Enciso, *Iglesia y atrio*, light gradually bathes the austere facade of a village church. The highest parts are the brightest. Desiccated trees seem to emerge in the foreground, from the base where the shade is deepest. Twisted fingers of the night. The scene, emphatically impressionist (due to the unreality of an image that makes us live that moment of the day with greater reality), is loaded with a frankly melancholy feeling of twilight. The artist and his feelings are present in this painting in an unusual way. The light denounces a movement of the soul.

This does not occur in correct, even outstanding landscapes, like Pedro Galarza Duran's in which the equally austere and colonial walls of a monastery are not part of the painter's spiritual movement. Or, as in Mateo Saldaña's almost static landscape, as if brought forth from a frozen glance in a typical instant of that scene, its countryside and its inhabitants. If the dominant feeling in Enciso is an intense and burgeoning melancholy, scrutiny of Galarza and Saldaña's landscapes barely reveals tenuous, very timid nostalgia.

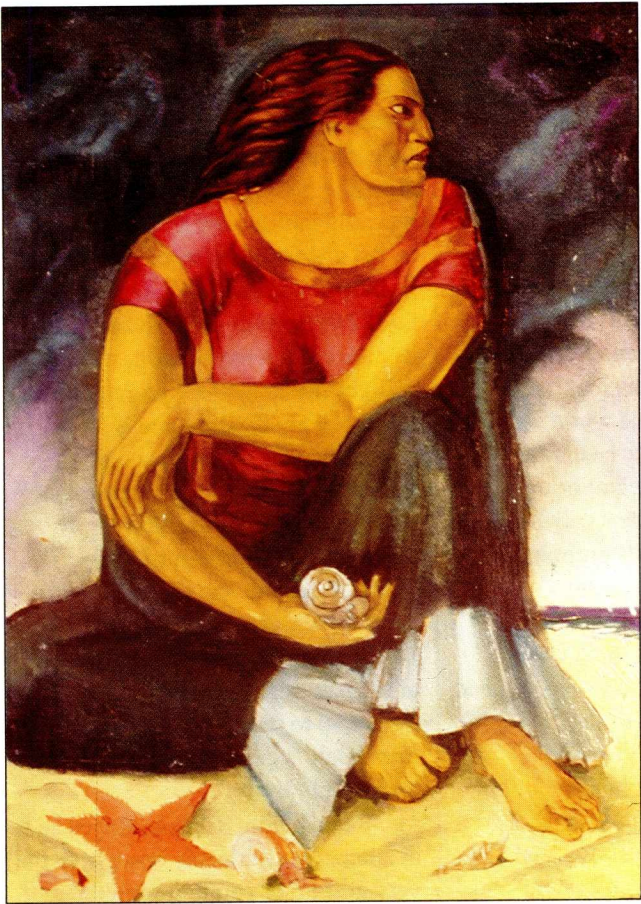
The difference between the latter two landscapes and those painted by Dr. Atl, Gerardo Murillo, is even greater than what differentiates them from Enciso's painting mentioned above. Feeling overflows from Dr. Atl's paintings. It is more force than spirit, or spirit as earthly force. The presence of the artist's drive in these paintings goes far beyond an impressionistic brush stroke, turning into a poetic: the forms of the landscape must be painted with formulas of composition and color that deliver that *something* that seems to rise from within him. It is no accident that his principal subject is volcanoes. Everything turns about them. The world itself is shaken by them, and out of their vibration, which becomes existential in the artist, emerge the world's new forms with their curvilinear horizons about to open and explode. Even the sun resembles a volcano exploding in the sky, the clouds, waves of lava. Rivers and waterfalls made of lava too. The painter's very point of view from which we see the painted scene is not the peaceful one of a man on earth, but that of a man in flight. A scrutiny of the world, not like a bird's eye view, but one that gives the impression of a parabolic launching of fire from a volcano toward the world.

Though Enciso's painting is also tinged with fire, it is a timid candle beside the sun that burns in Dr. Atl's. But this volcanic sun in paintings such as *Rayos de sol*, so impregnated with the earth from which it appears to emerge, or so clearly "explosively tearing apart the sky," reminds me of "the black sun of melancholy" that Nerval intoned in his poem "El desdichado." The paradoxical radiance of these suns, so full of light and shadows even in broad daylight, is somewhat related to Dürer's black sun. Are not the volcanoes themselves a kind of black sun, illuminating with their fire that which they themselves seem to have created?

While Enciso's melancholy is passive, Gerardo Murillo's is active. The former suffers the world as it is. The latter creates the world he suffers. It is no accident that Dr. Atl is not only painter, but an essayist, the creator of a utopian Atlantis. He is a creator of worlds, who wishes for a perfection that does not exist. He looks forth from the shadows he invents. In the Middle Ages this active melancholy was called *melancholia generosa*, because it is creative. It is born of the artist's dissatisfaction with the world and moves him to fulfill his cravings. In contrast, passive melancholy forced the artist to sink into inactivity and commit the sin of "languor," to sadly do nothing, very common in monasteries. Active melancholy forces the artist to pursue his longings without restraint, to burst out of himself and achieve that which he lacks, the lack of which makes him melancholy.

Passive melancholy was considered a malady, the active kind was more like a gift, a sign of creative temperament. Melancholy is characteristic of philosophers, scientists and artists in general. Such is the volcanic melancholy of Dr. Atl.

Another artist of paradoxical fire, of the black sun, is unquestionably José Clemente Orozco. In him, fury, mocking but deep seated laughter, and the most rending melancholy are all one. His art completely abandons the world of impression that Murillo had begun to leave, to fully enter the world of expression. Just as an odd aside, his *Naturaleza muerta*, includes echoes of melancholy paintings by De Chirico or his brother Savinio. But the melancholy that appears before us in most of Orozco's work is of another kind: neither contemplative nor reflexive, but epic. The *melancholia generosa* that forces the artist to seek the satisfaction of his craving for that which he lacks, assumes the dimensions of a heroic exploit and becomes the Great Quest.



Roberto Montenegro, *Tehuana on the Beach*.



José María Estrada, *Portrait of Lorenza Martínez Negrete*, 1839.



Gerardo Murillo (Dr. Atl), *Parícutín Landscape (Lateral Explosion)*, 1943.

Wherefore, History with its sequence of infernos, its villains or tyrants or demons, can become the central theme of an oeuvre like Orozco's, in which the artist seems always to be emerging from an inferno, a brothel-like underworld, a tyrant's cesspool, or from the apocalypse of the Conquest or the Revolution. Active melancholy again, heading for a beyond that outstrips mankind. Hence that mural manifesto of the *Hombre en llamas*, in Guadalajara's Hospicio Cabañas, self-portrait of a man emerging from himself, full of primordial strength that transcends everything. The melancholy search is of blood and fire in Orozco. It is of melancholy in the face of the world's chaotic end, painted from the point of view of the apocalypse.

Melancholia generosa continues to appear, transformed, throughout other works. Is there not an echo of Giorgio de Chirico's geometric melancholy also in Roberto Montenegro's still lifes and in the perspectives that make up the background of some of his portraits? In the painting *Tehuana llorando a su muerto* the very subject is melancholy, apart from the presence of the dead man in the foreground and the Tehuana's hard, distant expression, her gaze lost on the horizon. On the left of the composition appears a kind of globe, a sphere without a map, on two axes, like an echo of the astrolabe that frequently appears in classical illustrations of melancholy in centuries past. Curiously, in his *Autorretrato* the sphere resembles a mirror in which he portrays himself painting. One might think, not without a measure of exaggeration, that one of the allegorical objects of melancholy, the sphere, changes into the universe in which the artist is reflected: a reflection of reflections.

The link with Giorgio de Chirico, the quintessential melancholic, is present in Manuel González Serrano and, as a matter of fact, his painting *Aprendices de torero* was included in

the exhibition of Mexican painting tinged with "De Chirician metaphysics" held parallel to a recent De Chirico exposition at the Museo de Arte Moderno. The apprentices spread their red capes between light and shade before a very fleeting perspective, with the city in the background. The great bull ring is at the vertex to which everything leads and, at the right, perhaps a cemetery behind a wall over which only dry branches protrude. The world also flees beyond a still life he entitled *Equilibrio*. The vital equilibrium seems also to be momentarily on the point of breaking in his portraits and his remarkable *Autorretrato*.

The same relationship to De Chirico is present in Carlos Orozco Romero, particularly in *Sueño*, a scene in perspective typical of the "metaphysical genre," and in the geometrical emphasis of some of his portraits and still lifes. Melancholy becomes completely passive again in Guerrero Galván. His characters' gaze, some against typically melancholy perspectives, is again lost on the horizon, they are in repose, looking at what does not exist, or what might be within the things facing them. His girls and madonnas are primarily melancholy beings. Even in scenes in which there are more characters and some action, including a horse and rider, as in *Sueño de juventud*, lassitude, existential inactivity, the frozen instant, profound peace in sadness, are dominant.

Melancholy becomes intelligent, ironic, in the work of Juan Soriano. Even in his paintings of little dead girls, following "the ritual art of the child death," the burial of little angels, sadness is ironic, full of amusement. In *La mesa negra*, he presents contrasting objects that vary from a skull to a toy and children chasing each other. In *La playa*, the central figure—the author himself—is

crying and being consoled by two women—his sisters Martha and Rosa. A scene of angels and demons unfolds in the background. In the *Retrato de Lola Álvarez Bravo con Juan Soriano niño*, she photographs herself in a typically melancholy pose, one hand on her cheek, the other caressing the smiling child. The 1947 *Retrato de Lupe Marín*, with its large hands and its gaze lost on the horizon, with a twilight sky in the background, is no less melancholy. But there is something of almost imperceptible mischief in the way she caresses her necklace and holds her flowers. In Soriano's 1961 portrait of Lupe Marín, the game, the toy, the mischievous gesture, ceases to be subject and becomes the very matter of the painting, passing from the figurative to the abstract: the form itself is gentle mischief, melancholy irony.

Years before, Chucho Reyes had, in another way, already brought to the very gesture of painting something of the aspect of a religious carnival with which he saw the world. But the recovery of the popular element in his oeuvre blurred the artistic modernity of what he did. It was a return to that which is elementary in the artistic gesture which, if in Chucho Reyes was more traditional, in Soriano is both contemporaneity and simple ironic intelligence. Reyes seemed prey to nostalgia: even his most festive paintings, such as the cock fight, occur in the face of death, and this one, echoing the popular song, is entitled *Se me murió el que yo más quería*. Reyes' almost fauvist Christs, his baroque angels, his animals, seem to take part in that black Easter parade that appears to preside over his *Autorretrato con la muerte*. Black ritual and carnival.

The popular element in María Izquierdo is not a matter of nostalgia, or material to be worked on, but a



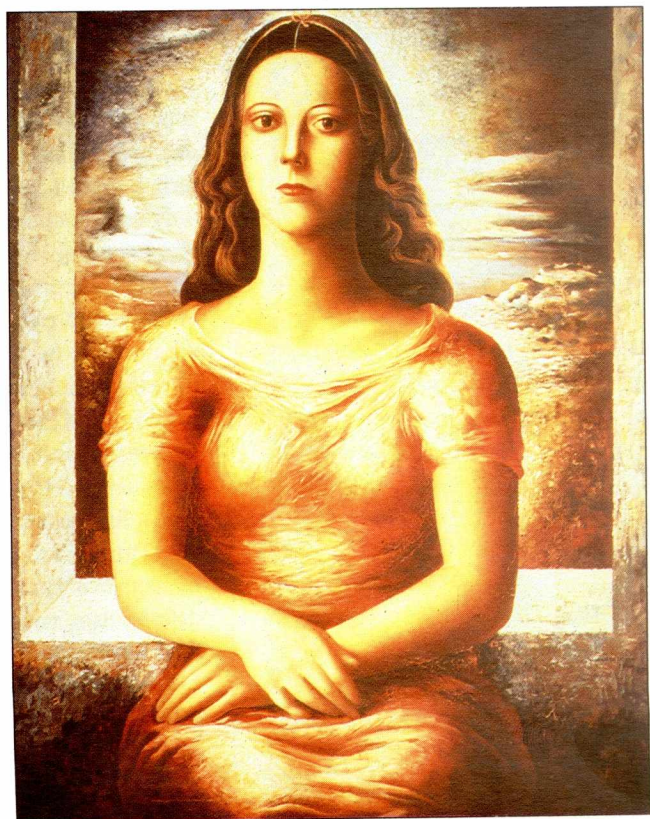
Manuel González Serrano, *Equilibrium*, 1940.

Chucho Reyes, *The One I Loved Most Died On Me*, ca. 1972.



María Izquierdo, *Still Life*, 1946.

Jesús Guerrero Galván, *Portrait of María Asúnsolo*, 1934.



remainder. Like the remains of a shipwreck. She is not nostalgic, but observes the decomposition and recomposition of the forms that surround her, with a calm gaze tinged with melancholy. Her still lifes do indeed resemble desertions. The sadness and almost innocent grace that touch her work go hand in hand. Unlike her, who says much wanting to say little, some of Jorge González Camarena's still lifes, such as *La ofrenda* or *La fuerza de la palabra*, want to say much and are yet hermetic, doors that are closed to us, or too eloquent and therefore obvious, like the *Exhumación del conquistador Cristóbal Romero*. The play of forms is more interesting in *Paisaje con flores*, or González Camarena's paintings for Cruz Azul, where an echo of art deco makes his compositions contemporary, whereas at the time they were seen perhaps as only promotional. It frequently happens that in time, what an artist considers most important in his oeuvre becomes complementary, and vice versa. Often what is accepted in his time for ideological reasons, for example in the case of many second rank muralists, may in time be seen as only commonplace, uniformity, *doxa*. Not the paradox essential to art. But the same occurs with formal modernity in recent years. Painters who want to be "modern" discover in time that that is what first goes out of fashion. And that the formal labels, the profoundest formulas of sixties, seventies and eighties art, last no more than a few decades.

Time will tell how some of the painters that surround us escape determinism, not of their region but of their "modernity," a region of the soul. I see in several of them aspects of flight that interest me or suddenly attract my attention. In Javier Arévalo, the figurative fades toward the simplest play of forms — Paul Klee's beneficent

ghost— as in *Un hombre y una mujer*. In Luis Valsoto, who has also painted dead children, it is the close presence of corpses that elicits a new sensuality far from stereotypes of bodily beauty. In Jorge Alzaga, it is the least misty and most natural scenes, such as the melancholy woman in *El tedio*. In Alejandro Colunga, it is the carnival and in Ismael Vargas the vacuity of excess. In Enrique Guzmán, it is pain, as in his painting *Estigma*. Just as in many of Martha Pacheco's works, painting that borders on all frontiers: the borders of representation and of her figures. In Javier Campos Cabello it is the crumbling of human nature, its decomposition turned into the design of the painting. In Gabriel Macotela, it is the rich combination of languages, planes, volumes and lines. In Roberto Rébora, it is the search for the traditions of this century that is perceived as sharp and ravenous. In Rodal, it is his capacity for play. And in Carlos Vargas Pons, the dissolution of forms, of faces, of the very surface of the painting, is also melancholy and its search is very deep: having mastered the realistic gamut with paintings of figures heavy with sleep, inactivity, sadness, in his own way he brings to aesthetic expression itself the spiritual motion that might have formerly been within his static figures. The melancholy soul captures the form of the painting itself, thus accelerating its flight.

Shadows that flee a possible definition of the art of Jalisco, fleeing a light that would suffuse them with a sameness seeking to fix them in their place and time. The artists who here offer us their works appear to my selective scrutiny as differentiated versions of that *melancholia generosa* that moved them to make what had never been made, what they lack and what moves them. ❧